

[Something Better for my Boy]

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[Roaldus?] Richmond

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“Our shed opened up again this week, the last week in January. Three big sheds opened the same time. Now all the big ones are going again, but some of the little ones are still shut. They all shut down for a few weeks after Christmas. That's the winter lay-off. Now they'll go through to Decoration Day. After that's the spring lay-off, a few weeks, a month maybe, sometimes more. It's hard to lose time like that. It's good for a man to rest up, but it takes the money you got saved to live on. With nothing coming in the money goes damn fast.

“Our shed is small. Only seven or eight men, and the boss works like the rest of us. I've worked in the big sheds, but I just soon be where I am now. Everything goes easier, smoother, seems to me. The boss is one of us. He makes more money, sure, but he's just another stonecutter. He's a good man too, and without saying anything he has us working hard to keep up with him. The last day we worked before Christmas he brought down four gallons of wine. We knocked off early and all drank together. That makes a good feeling. All drinking and laughing and singing together, telling stories and arguing, happy together with the good taste and good feeling of the wine. You don't get much of that in the big places.

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"Of course with us we don't have just one job to do, like in the big sheds. We have to help each other out. We don't have a saw, so we get the blocks sawed at Berolini's. When they come in here we maybe all help chain them up for the 2 derrickman to move and set them down in place. Then the surface-cutters take them. I started on the surface-cutting machine, but I'm a carver too now. I still do some of the surface-cutting here — two or three of us handle that end of it. That means working the stone down to an even level. It's heavy cutting and it throws up a lot of dust. After it's evened down it goes to the polishing machine, unless you want a rough-hampered finish on it. The polisher shines it off smooth as glass. Then if it's a sandblast job it goes to the sandblast men, and they carve and letter it by air-pressure blowing an abrasive against the stone. If they want finer work it comes to us carvers, and we use the pneumatic chisels on it. In the old days the chiseling was all by hand.

"We've got our own blacksmith. He helps with other work too, when he's not too busy at the forge. He has to keep an edge on all the steel used for cutting. It's quite a trick to heat them just right and hammer them out to a good cutting edge again. Then with the finished piece anybody who's not too busy helps on the lumping and boxing, and when the derrick sets it on the flat-car or truck—whichever way it's shipped—it's ready to go. Maybe it goes anywhere in the country. It goes way off to some cemetery we're never going to see. But we forget about it, sure. There's always more pieces to cut. There's always more people dying.

"I went to the fights the other night. They weren't very good, but the Armory was full of people. It's a good town for sports like that. They hold the fights every two or three weeks, and they always get good crowds. They've had some pretty 3 good boys here, but this last card wasn't much. Sometimes they get boys from a stable in Portland, Maine, and they're good fighters. This time they had a couple fellows from Fort Ethan Allen. Soldiers. I guess they could scrap if they were in condition, but it looked like they'd been drinking before the fights. Quite a bunch came over from the Fort, all celebrating, you know. The

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boxers must've had some, too. [These?] soldiers would fight like hell for a minute or so, and then they were done. Their wind was gone, their legs was gone... They had guts, though. They stayed in there and took their licking. And they both took an awful beating, too! They were all cut up, bleeding, and pretty sick soldiers when they got through... About the best part of the show was the first bout. They put these two little kids on, and they were good. Afterwards the crowd threw coins in the ring for them. The kids must've picked up four-five dollars apiece anyway.

"Time before this our middleweight, [Keja?], showed he had no guts. He was fighting a nigger from Portland. Keja wouldn't fight. He just covered up, clinched, hung on for his life. Keja's been a hero here, too, but the crowd got disgusted that night. They booed him awful, and he deserved it. He was scared and yellow. That nigger made him look awful bad.

"All these local boys turn out like that. They get swelled heads, you know. They get to running round with a bum crowd, they start drinking and going with the wrong kind of girls. Pretty soon they're all done, licked. You can't tell them anything, they won't listen. Keja got to thinking he was good, a bigshot. Once he might have gone somewhere in the ring. Now 4 he'll end up right here hanging round the poolrooms and beer joints. I knew Keja's old man, he was the same way. Big-headed, smart, cocky. He was a stonecutter, a good man too, but he'd never listen to anybody. He died of t.b., wouldn't take care of himself. But one thing I'll say for him, Old Keja never would've quit the way Young Keja did against that nigger.

"The toughest boys we've got in town aren't those you see in the ring. They're the ones like the Callano boys. Those Callanos are really tough! They aren't very big fellows, but they're strong and quick, fast. Not afraid of anything. They were bootleggers during Prohibition. They've all been in jail one time or another. I've seen them lick big husky guys like nothing. I guess they love to fight, those crazy Callanos. They're little square-built boys with tough-looking faces and great big hands on them. And they know how to use those fists.

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"I like a good drink as well as anybody. But you can't drink and fight in the ring. You can't drink too much and do anything hard like that...[Barre's?] a pretty good drinking town. You can tell that from all the drinking places you see along Main Street. Start on North Main down towards the stonesheds there, with the Venetian [Garden?], and they're lined all the way up through — [Pirpo's?], Silver Top, Luigi's, Mario's, Barre Restaurant, Andy's Spa, Cellar Grill, so many you can't remember them. Way out to the Southern Tavern on South Main. Lots of places on side streets, too. And over in the Granite Street section around the stonesheds you can get drinks in plenty of private houses — if they know you. And you can get some real fine Italian foods, too. As good as anywhere there is. Stonecutters 5 are hard-drinking men. All men who do hard dangerous work are drinkers and like a good time. I've seen a lot of good stonecutters go to hell from drinking. But some of them say they'd rather go from drink than from the dust...

"Stonecutters like sports, excitement, something doing. They like to bowl, shoot pool, gamble, everything like that. They've got real blood in their veins and muscles in their bodies... But most of them are good family men, and generous hearted fellows, too generous sometimes.

"I'm an Irishman. My wife says I got the map of Ireland on my face, and I guess she's right. I married an Italian girl here. My folks came over from Ireland; some place outside of Dublin. They stopped in New York. One of my brothers is a cop down there now. He liked New York and stayed there, but the rest of us wanted to get away. My father was a stone mason. He took us to Boston and he worked in the [Quincy?] stonesheds awhile. I was still just a kid. When we left Ireland I was a baby. My folks had some hard times there, and my father never spoke of Ireland. But my mother was always talking about the blue mountains and the lakes, and she never stopped loving it. She was always singing Irish songs around the house. She died in Quincy.

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"My other brother and I learnt the stone-cutting trade there, and then my brother went to Maine to work. My father and I came up to Barre. He had friends here, and here he worked until he died.

"That must've been twenty years ago anyway. I've been working here ever since. In our shed we've got all kinds of 6 nationalities. The boss is Italian, and there are two more Italians, a Spaniard, a Scotchman, a Swede, and another Irish-man besides me. Sometimes a couple French fellows work with us when business is fast. It's funny but we don't have any trouble. They're all pretty good fellows, that's why. The granite business has got to be more important than nationality. If a man's a real man it don't matter what nationality he is — unless he's an Englishman! I learnt to hate the English from my father. But I think now, if an Englishman came into our shed, and he was a good square man, I wouldn't hold any feelings against him.

"We've got a boy and a girl, both in high school. I wish I could send them to college, but I don't see how. I told the girl to take a business course so she could go into an office. That way she don't need college, she can get a good job without it. For the boy it will be harder. There's too many men in the world today. That's what Germany and Russia think too, I guess. Too many men, not enough jobs.

"My boy wants to take up aviation now. My wife don't like the idea, but I think you'd better let a boy do what he wants to do. And flying is getting bigger all the time. If he wants to fly, and he can get into it, I won't try to stop him. It never came into his head to be a stonecutter like his father and grandfather. I'm glad he don't want to cut stone. Not that I'm ashamed of my trade. I'm proud of it.

"But for my boy I want something better, you know, the way any man does for his son. That's why I don't mind the hard work. I'd work harder and longer if it'd mean more money 7 coming. Our shed is pretty cold and damp in the wintertime. The floor is dirt and the wind blows through the walls. I've got a hernia that bothers me bad sometimes. If it wasn't for

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my family I might start hitting the bottle like some of the boys do, and let everything slide. But they keep me going all right, and I'll work as long as I can. I don't want my boy to have to work like this all his life."